



# THE IMPORTANCE OF OUT-GROUP ACCEPTANCE IN ADDITION TO IN-GROUP SUPPORT IN PREDICTING THE WELL-BEING OF SAME-SEX ATTRACTED YOUTH

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## Abstract

Studies investigating the well-being of same-sex attracted youth have generally not distinguished between the role of support from friends sharing their minority status and the role of acceptance from areas outside these friendships. To address this issue, 127 (67 female, 60 male) same-sex attracted youth aged 18 to 25 years were asked to complete a self-report questionnaire examining the role of out-group acceptance in predicting the psychological well-being of these youth, over and above that afforded by support from members of their own minority group. Perceived acceptance of their sexual orientation from heterosexual friends, heterosexual contacts apart from friends (such as neighbours, co-workers, employers, or teachers), and from their mother significantly added to the prediction of these youth's well-being, while controlling for perceived support from their sexual minority friends. These findings are discussed in relation to the unique barriers sexual minorities face to in-group socialisation.

## Introduction

Recent research suggests that same-sex attracted youth are disclosing their sexual orientation to others in growing numbers and at earlier ages (Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Owens, 1998; Savin-Williams, 1998). This can be considered encouraging in that this trend may be a reflection of a positive change in attitudes towards people who do not identify as heterosexual (Altemeyer, 2001). However, it also raises some concerns, as earlier disclosure means that youth are revealing their same-sex attractions at more vulnerable life stages. Although several recent studies indicate that many of today's youth experience positive reactions to the disclosure of their same-sex attractions, they also reveal that some of these youth are not so fortunate (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998; Hillier et al., 1998; Savin-Williams, 2001). Even those who

perceive considerable acceptance may well have to cope with some negativity as a result of the disclosure of their sexual orientation. Indeed, it is unlikely that any individual will experience reactions that are uniformly positive. Further, an attempt by others to respond favourably to the knowledge of a youth's same-sex attractions may sometimes be expressed as ambivalence rather than unqualified acceptance. As such, research examining from where and to what extent acceptance and support predicts the psychological well-being of sexual minority youth remains an important area of investigation.

Studies focusing on the negative effects of prejudice and discrimination against minority groups have found that identification with and support from members of one's own minority group can enhance psychological well-being, as well as provide a buffer against the adverse effects of a devalued minority status. For example, Halpern (1993) in reviewing studies on the relation of ethnic minority status to the prevalence of mental health problems, presented evidence from several countries to suggest that minorities who reside in areas that have a higher concentration of individuals sharing the same minority status tend to show lower psychiatric admission rates, when compared to those who disperse. Branscombe, Schmitt, and Harvey (1999) found strong evidence in support of their proposed rejection-identification model which posits that negative evaluations of one's minority group that are perceived as pervasive can harm psychological well-being, but that these damaging effects can be suppressed through increased identification with the minority group. In further support of this model was a study by Postmes and Branscombe (2002) examining the effects of different racial environments on the subjective well-being of African Americans. They found that having lived long-term in a racially segregated area, in contrast to a racially mixed environment, was associated with feelings of in-group acceptance and increased in-group identification. In turn, in-group identification was found to be a strong predictor of

psychological well-being. Further, a study by Romero and Roberts (2003) involving Mexican American youth found that of the youth who perceived high discrimination, those who reported high ethnic affirmation had higher self-esteem than those who reported low ethnic affirmation.

Crocker and Major (1989) have suggested that through affiliation with one's own stigmatised in-group, members are more likely to make social comparisons with others who are similarly disadvantaged and thereby protect themselves from the potentially damaging effects of comparisons with more advantaged out-groups. Several studies support this view, showing that the more minority group members perceive being devalued by dominant groups the more highly they identified with their own group (e.g., Dion & Earn, 1975; Sanders Thompson, 1990; Simon et al., 1998). It is important to note that the benefits of in-group affiliation may not necessarily apply to situations in which members also hold a marginal or minority position within their own in-group (e.g., those whose race, age, gender, religion, or sexual orientation differs from most other group members). The issue of multiple minority status will be discussed in more detail later. However, taken collectively (and at least in the case of prototypical members) findings seem to suggest that feelings of support and commonality provided by one's own in-group can work to buffer the stressful effects of rejection from a more powerful out-group. Researchers have suggested that this may be one reason why the prediction of lower global self-esteem among stigmatised groups has generally not been empirically supported (for a review see Crocker & Major, 1989).

This evidence for minority resilience against stigmatised status, however, is inconsistent with the findings from a growing body of evidence showing a higher prevalence of mental health problems among sexual minority adults and youth when compared to their heterosexual counterparts (for reviews see Bailey, 1999; Cochran, 2001; Meyer, 2003). Meyer (2003), in a meta-analysis, suggests that differences in the socialisation of this minority group compared with racial/ethnic minorities may result in a greater impact of minority stress on sexual minorities. For example, he notes that as lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals are not born into their minority identity but rather develop it later in life, they do not have the

same opportunity afforded racial/ethnic minorities of growing up with similar others in a self-enhancing social environment. Telljohann and Price (1993) also highlighted this crucial difference when describing a sense of belonging for a marginalised group whose family does not share their same minority status. They point out that even under the worst conditions of social rejection, racial, ethnic and religious minority youth most often have the opportunity to receive positive socialisation from their family about their subculture and group identity. They go on to emphasise how gay youth are instead socialised into values and beliefs that often conflict with their self-definition.

As a consequence, those with same-sex attractions need to actively seek affirmation of their group identity, whether it is from family or friends, or through trying to find others who share their minority status. The relatively concealable nature of sexual orientation can make identifying similar others challenging. Furthermore, revealing a non-heterosexual orientation in order to foster social support from in-group members may expose some sexual minorities to increased prejudice from out-group members. For example, Miller and Major (2000) have suggested that individuals with invisible stigmas may be more reluctant to seek social support or become involved in collective coping strategies, as these responses can make their stigmatised condition apparent to others. While research has provided evidence to suggest that individuals from racial and cultural minority groups are able to benefit psychologically through clustering together, thereby increasing their group density (Halpern, 1993; Postmes & Branscombe, 2002), sexual minorities generally find themselves dispersed amongst the heterosexual population. These barriers to socialisation with in-group members suggest that the protection afforded by a sense of community belonging may be more difficult to attain for those who identify as non-heterosexual than for individuals with hereditary and more visible identities. As such, positive evaluations from out-group members (i.e., the heterosexual community) may play a significant role in the psychological well-being of sexual minorities, beyond that explained by support from their own in-group members.

Several studies have already established that acceptance and support (from family and/or friends) is positively related to the well-being of

both adult and younger sexual minorities (Anderson, 1998; Floyd, Stein, Harter, Allison, & Nye, 1999; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987; Luhtanen, 2003; Savin-Williams, 1989; Vincke & Van Heeringen, 2002). However, this literature cannot speak to the independent contribution of heterosexual acceptance, while taking into account the level of support gained from members of one's own sexual minority group. That is, does perceived acceptance from others who do not share a young person's minority status in regards to sexuality make a unique contribution to the prediction of the young person's well-being, even when controlling for support from what seems like an extremely important reference group (i.e., their like-minded peers)? Or do perceptions of heterosexual acceptance merely reflect the comfort gained from the support of similar others?

To address these questions, the current study examined whether perceptions of accepting attitudes from various sectors of the heterosexual community would contribute to the well-being of sexual minority youth when taking into account perceived support from members of their own minority group. In light of the barriers to in-group socialisation for sexual minorities, it was predicted that youths' perceptions of acceptance of their sexual orientation from heterosexual friends, heterosexual contacts apart from friends (such as neighbours, teachers, co-workers, and employers), and from their mother and father, would predict their psychological well-being over and above the support they perceived from their sexual minority friends.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants in this study were 127 self-defined same-sex attracted young adults. The 67 females and 60 males ranged from 18 to 25 years of age, with the average age being 21.1. A large majority identified as white, with small numbers identifying as Asian, Aboriginal/ Torres Strait Islander, Maori New Zealander, and being of mixed race. The majority resided in metropolitan areas of southeast Queensland, with participants being recruited from five university campuses, various sexual minority social groups and events, and through friendship networks.

### *Materials*

A self-report questionnaire was specifically developed for this study to assess (a) a youth's self-defined sexual orientation, (b) areas of disclosure and extent of disclosure of sexual orientation, (c) perceived level of acceptance of sexual orientation for each area of disclosure, and (d) perceived level of support from sexual minority friends.

Participants were asked if they had disclosed their sexual orientation, or were confident others were aware of their sexual orientation in four separate domains: heterosexual friends; heterosexual contacts apart from friends (such as neighbours, co-workers, employers, or teachers); mother; and father. Measurements of overall perceived acceptance of sexual orientation from each of these sectors involved single item responses with options ranging from *not at all accepting* to *fully accepting*. Support from sexual minority friends overall was assessed using a single item with the response options in this case ranging from *not at all supportive* to *extremely supportive*. The term 'support' was specified as referring to ways in which friends may be helpful, caring, or encouraging. To assess extent of disclosure (or other's awareness of their same-sex attractions), participants were asked what proportion of their friends they estimated to be heterosexual, and what proportion of their heterosexual friends and heterosexual contacts they were confident were aware of their sexual orientation.

This study included two additional measures that were combined and averaged to form a single measure of well-being as the dependent variable; the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) (Rosenberg, 1965); and The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The RSE is a 10-item scale that assesses an individual's global self-esteem. The SWLS is a 5-item scale asking participants to rate their satisfaction with life as a whole. Both of these scales have been shown to have good internal consistency in studies with youth (Diener, et al., 1985; Fleming & Courtney, 1984; Maguen, Floyd, Bakeman, & Armistead, 2002).

### *Procedure*

The scales described here were presented as a single packaged questionnaire, with the well-being measures presented last. With the exception of a small percentage of youth

recruited through friendship networks, prospective participants were approached with a flyer that invited the participation of 18 to 25 year olds who considered themselves to be non-heterosexual. In the majority of cases youth presented with the opportunity to participate in the study were approached in small groups (e.g., universities' 'diverse sexuality' rooms, social groups). In the case of one large outdoor social event, the recruitment of participants was limited to situations conducive to filling in a questionnaire (e.g., sitting at tables or on the grass), and did not involve approaching those who remained transient among the stalls. As all individuals were approached in a sexual minority 'safe place', the issue of disclosure through the request of a questionnaire was not a concern.

### Findings and discussion

Consistent with research indicating an increasing rate of disclosure among sexual minority youth, the same-sex attracted youth in this study reported being open with others about their sexual orientation, at least to a moderate degree. The majority reported that most of their heterosexual friends, and more than half of their heterosexual contacts were aware of their sexual orientation. Also consistent with recent studies involving American sexual minority youth (Savin-Williams, 1998), a very large percentage of the young people in this current sample reported their mothers' knowledge of their sexual orientation. Results indicated that fathers were less likely than mothers to know of their child's same-sex attractions, although almost three-quarters of these youth stated that they had disclosed to fathers or were confident their fathers were aware. However, the extent to which individuals' interpersonal networks as a whole knew of their sexual orientation varied between individuals, with only just over half of this sample indicating that others in all four areas were aware of their sexual orientation. As such, despite what seems to be a higher rate of disclosure among the sexual minority youth of today, the data suggest that many may still have reservations about revealing their same-sex attractions in certain sectors.

#### *Acceptance and Support*

Due to the fact that the areas in which youth felt confident that others were aware of their same-sex attractions varied between individuals, a separate analysis (reported elsewhere, Dane & MacDonald, 2005) was conducted for each area of acceptance while controlling for sexual

minority support. Results showed that for each analysis the level of support youth perceived from their sexual minority friends was a significant predictor of their well-being, with those reporting higher levels of this support also reporting higher levels of psychological well-being. This outcome is consistent with prior research suggesting that minority in-group support and in-group identification can enhance well-being, as well as act as a buffer against the stressors associated with a devalued minority status (Halpern, 1993; Branscombe et al., 1999).

However, the main purpose of this study was to investigate if out-group (heterosexual) acceptance would play a significant role in predicting same-sex attracted youth's well-being over and above that afforded by support from members of their own minority group. This hypothesis was supported overall, with the level of acceptance youth perceived from their heterosexual friends, from their heterosexual contacts apart from friends, and from their mother, each predicting well-being while controlling for sexual minority support. Importantly, support from sexual minority friends remained a significant predictor when adding heterosexual acceptance to the analyses. Thus, perceptions of positive attitudes from out-group members appears to play a unique role in contributing to the well-being of same-sex attracted youth, as opposed to acting as a substitute for in-group support.

The one area of acceptance that was only partially supported by this study was that of parental acceptance. When taking into account perceived support from sexual minority friends, a mother's acceptance predicted the well-being of female, but not male, youth. Further, a father's acceptance was not a significant predictor of well-being for either gender. These findings appear consistent with those of earlier studies showing positive maternal but not paternal attitudes to predict same-sex attracted youth's well-being (Floyd et al., 1999), with this form of approval appearing to be particularly important for lesbian youth (Savin-Williams, 1989).

With the exception of the questionable importance of a father's acceptance, the results of this study are consistent with the argument that the unique socialisation of sexual minorities renders positive evaluations from out-group members an important contributor to well-being,

in addition to that afforded by minority group support. Prior research involving racial/ethnic minorities has suggested that for in-group support to be most effective in buffering the negative effects of a devalued minority status, it needs to provide a strong sense of community belonging. For example, Halpern (1993) noted that minority mental health appeared to be comparable with that of dominant group members when there was a substantial percentage (perhaps a minimum of a 30-40% concentration) of the minority group within the local population. Similarly, Postmes and Branscombe (2002) found that African Americans who resided in neighbourhoods consisting mainly of fellow African Americans benefited psychologically due to the positive impact of high in-group identification on well-being. Sexual minority youth in the current study were mainly recruited through social groups and events, indicating at least some level of involvement with other same-sex attracted youth. However, this level of support hardly seems comparable to the relatively homogeneous environment experienced by minority group members who elect to congregate, thereby increasing their group density within the local population. Nor does it appear to be comparable to the history of social connection afforded other minority groups, in that the support network of sexual minorities is found later in life, rather than experienced as a social reality throughout childhood. Instead, non-heterosexual youth are almost certain to have been born into and raised by families who identify as part of the heterosexual community, placing them at greater risk for the challenges to well-being that arise from social isolation.

### **Limitations and future research**

Although these data suggest the importance of out-group acceptance in predicting same-sex attracted youths' well-being, the findings may not be generalisable to all sexual minority youth. For example, despite efforts to obtain a diverse sample, there was an overrepresentation of white, older-aged youth (18-25) with higher levels of education.

As the vast majority of these youth identified as members of the dominant white population in Australia, the findings of this study on the importance of both in-group support and out-group acceptance may not extend to youth who identify as non-white within the Australian sexual minority community. Indeed, research

suggest that individuals who are marginal members within their group, compared with those who are non-marginal, perceive lower levels of inclusiveness and more violations of trust as group members (Kramer, 1996). Boldero (2004), in discussing some of the implications of being a racial minority within a predominantly white gay community, describes how some gay Asian Australians may feel torn between two significant but conflicting identities, with identification in one area running the risk of social isolation from the other. This raises important questions with regard to what types of in-group support and out-group acceptance may be functional for sexual minorities whose ethnic origin differs from that of the dominant population.

Another limitation of this study is that it did not take into account whether or not youth were living independent of their parents. This factor may be related to the likelihood of disclosure to parents as well as the perceived importance of parental acceptance. In the current study mother's acceptance but not father's acceptance predicted youth's well-being, with the former applying to only female youth. However, parental acceptance may very well play a larger role for youth still living at home, particularly for those of a younger age who are more likely to be both emotionally and financially dependent on their families.

One constraint faced by research involving sexual minorities, is that the recruitment of participants generally requires their visibility. This often results in a sample largely limited to those who are accessible through sexual minority social networks or events. As a consequence, youth in such research are more likely to be receiving support from other sexual minority youth. This was confirmed in the current study with the large majority of youth reporting high levels of support from their like-minded peers. Thus, the results cannot speak to youth who are less open about their same-sex attractions or who do not access minority support networks. However, the high levels of sexual minority support reported by the youth in this study strengthens the argument that out-group acceptance plays an important role in predicting well-being, beyond that afforded by in-group support. That is, even though these youth generally perceived their like-minded peers as being very supportive, acceptance of their sexual orientation from various sectors of

the heterosexual community still added significantly to the prediction of their well-being.

Although the findings of this study suggest that positive evaluations by out-group members are important to the psychological well-being of same-sex attracted youth, they are not meant to imply that these youth lack resilience or play a submissive role in their interactions with individuals who do not share their sexual minority status. To the contrary, research suggests that sexual minorities employ a variety of active strategies when engaging with out-group members (Conley, Devine, Rabow, & Evett, 2002). What this study does suggest, however, is that the well-being of same-sex attracted youth relies on more than simply having access to similar youth with whom they can share their experiences. This is not surprising given that these youth are likely to spend the bulk of their home-life, school-life, and working-life, engaging with individuals whose values and lifestyles may be vastly different to their own. Research has often focused on the self-protective strategies of members of stigmatized groups (Branscombe et al., 1999; Crocker & Major, 1989; Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, 2003). However, the data from this study, along with sexual minority group members' limited access to in-group protection from social oppression, suggests that the welfare of these youth is very much a societal concern, particularly given the evidence that the existing state of affairs puts the health of these young people at risk. In this light, future research that both facilitates acceptance and helps to isolate some of the factors that may impede effective communication between individuals differing in sexual orientation will aid in providing equal access to well-being.

### Author note

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